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SUBJECT: RUSSIA'S CHUKOTKA REGION YEARNS FOR A BERINGIA PARK AND AN
ECONOMIC BOOST FROM ALASKA

REF: A. MOSCOW 1281
[1](#)B. VLADIVOSTOK 32

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SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED -- PLEASE HANDLE ACCORDINGLY.

[1](#)1. (U) SUMMARY: The Russian government is advocating for stronger economic, scientific, and cultural ties between its easternmost province of Chukotka and Alaska (ref A). The poster child for these aspirations, a "shared heritage area" -- in effect, a bilateral national parks partnership -- spanning the Bering Strait region, was among the topics of discussion at this year's sparsely attended "Beringia Days" conference in Chukotka's capital, Anadyr. The Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology optimistically predicts it will be ready to negotiate a bilateral agreement on the protected territory by March 2010, but the Russian government must leap several bureaucratic hurdles to establish federal park lands to contribute to the project. In addition, some Alaska native groups oppose the plan, fearing a loss of land use rights.

[1](#)2. (U) SUMMARY, continued: Although underpinned by strong shared indigenous ethnic ties, wildlife, environment, and even history, Chukotka-Alaska links are currently tenuous and fraught with logistical, linguistic, and bureaucratic obstacles. Among the most difficult impediments are barriers to travel. A limited visa-free regime for certain Bering Strait native groups has never functioned smoothly, and traveling to a U.S. consular office is often prohibitively expensive for Chukotkans requiring U.S. visas. Chukotka's Deputy Governor downplayed the bureaucratic difficulties in resolving these issues. He echoed the Foreign Ministry's call for improved transportation links and infrastructure, as well as expanding the existing visa-free regime to all permanent residents of Alaska and Chukotka. As an alternative to expanded visa-free travel, he suggested establishing a U.S. consular presence in Chukotka. END SUMMARY.

"BERINGIA DAYS" PROMISE WAITING TO BE FULFILLED

13. (U) On September 17-21, Embassy representatives visited Russia's easternmost province of Chukotka to attend the annual Beringia Days conference in the regional capital, Anadyr. First held in 1996, the conference gives government officials, scientists, NGOs, and native groups a forum to share information and develop projects of regional interest. Many projects discussed at the conference are funded by the National Park Service's Shared Beringian Heritage Program. Anchorage hosted the conference until 2003; since that time, the venue has alternated annually between Chukotka and Alaska. In Anadyr, a city of only 11,000 residents, Beringia Days qualifies as a major event. However, the conference made only a small splash. We saw no public advertising for it, and attendance was sparse, with barely 50 observers in the conference auditorium at any one time.

14. (U) This year's U.S. delegation of approximately 25 included students, academic researchers, and officials of the National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service. Presentations highlighted diverse research on native cultures, geology, history, and ecology. Some speakers presented oral histories of cross-border indigenous families; another reported on traditional native dress. There was even a presentation on the cultural significance of mushrooms. But ironically, for a conference designed to highlight and promote cross-border connections, very few presentations touched on U.S.-Russian cooperation. An Alaska-based geologist concluded his report on the evolution of Arctic landforms with an appeal for Russian collaboration. He later told ESTOff that in his many years of research, he has never worked with Russian counterparts on this regional topic. The director of Chukotka's Department of Culture, Sport, Tourism, and Public Affairs told us that while the territory has regular sports exchanges with Canada, there is no such exchange with the United States to speak of, and several attempts by Chukotka officials to reach out to American counterparts on proposed exchanges have had no results.

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VISAS AND OTHER TRAVEL HURDLES LIMIT COOPERATION

15. (U) Several conference participants and regional officials cited visa difficulties as barriers to closer contact. To obtain a U.S. visa, most Chukotka residents must fly to either Vladivostok or Moscow for an interview. Flights to Vladivostok run only every two weeks, or more rarely, depending on weather. The cost of the nine-hour flight to Moscow, currently around \$1800, is prohibitively expensive for most Russian students, scientists, and local officials.

16. (U) Dora Poluksht, the director of Chukotka's regional education department, told us that high school exchanges have a bleak future if travel between Chukotka and Alaska is not simplified. An Anchorage high school recently invited Chukotka students to visit Alaska as part of a school partnership program, and students even raised money to cover airfare. But the Russian students were forced to cancel their trip because of the expense of obtaining a visa.

17. (U) Some travelers can cross the Alaska-Chukotka border without visas, at least in theory. The 1989 U.S.-USSR Agreement on Mutual Visits by Inhabitants of the Bering Straits Region provided a means for members of specific ethnic groups residing in designated districts of Alaska and Chukotka to travel visa-free to qualifying districts across the border. The agreement was intended to facilitate family and cultural links among Beringia's indigenous peoples. However, according to several conference participants and as earlier reported by Consulate General Vladivostok (ref B), the travel procedures have never operated smoothly.

18. (U) The original Bering Straits Agreement requires eligible travelers from both the United States and Russia to provide at least ten days' advance notice of visa-free travel and to carry an insert in their passports certifying permanent residence in one of the qualifying districts. In 1991, the two sides amended the agreement so that qualifying Alaska residents could travel to Chukotka with

passport stamps instead of inserts. However, Russian border guards have not accepted passport stamps, thereby shutting down visa-free travel to the designated Russian areas by eligible Alaska natives. One Alaska native at the Beringia Days conference recounted a visit to Chukotka earlier this year in which border guards detained her delegation for five hours due to alleged problems with their travel documents. She did not say whether the dispute concerned the passport stamp mentioned above. Many Chukotka residents, on the other hand, have followed these procedures and visited Alaska without incident, according to conference participants. Our MFA contacts and Chukotka's deputy governor have told us that problems have arisen for U.S. travelers because the USG has never fully complied with the procedures under the Bering Straits Agreement (see para. 16).

¶9. (U) Aside from the problem of travel documents, logistics also present obstacles. There are no regularly scheduled commercial flights between Chukotka and Alaska, although the Alaska-based carrier Bering Air provides charter flights from Nome. In addition, Chukotka remains a restricted territory. American visitors, as well as Russians not permanently resident in Chukotka, must obtain a special permit from the Russian federal government in order to visit. The permit -- which requires an invitation from a Chukotka-based entity at least 30 days in advance of travel, or 40 days for non-Russians -- introduces further delay and complication into an already complicated process.

¶10. (U) The Foreign Ministry has urged the USG to help establish direct mail links between Chukotka and Alaska (ref A). Prominent Chukotkan dogsled racer Nikolai Ettyne told us in Anadyr that this is necessary, because even something as simple as sending a letter between Chukotka and Alaska is a risky undertaking. Ettyne told us that he missed an important deadline recently when sending an

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express mail package through the Russian mail system from Chukotka to Alaska, because the package was delayed several days, being routed first through Moscow and Western Europe before reaching the United States.

BERINGIA PARK NOT READY FOR PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT

¶11. (U) The poster child for closer Alaska-Chukotka ties is a "Beringia Shared Heritage Area" -- in effect, a bilateral national parks partnership, consisting of pre-existing protected nature territories on either side of the Bering Strait. The United States and the Soviet Union first jointly resolved to create a "U.S.-Soviet International Park" at a presidential summit in 1990, but the idea ran into snags on both the U.S. and Russian sides. One of the chief impediments on the Russian side has been the absence of a federally protected territory to contribute to the project.

¶12. (SBU) On September 14, Aleksey Troitskiy of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Ecology (MNRE) told us that plans are proceeding apace to transfer Russia's existing Beringia Nature-Ethnic Park, located in Chukotka, from regional to federal jurisdiction. Troitskiy said that feasibility studies on the proposal should be completed by year's end, and interagency approval of a federal management structure for the park will likely take an additional three months. He estimated that by the end of March 2010, Russia would be ready to negotiate a bilateral agreement establishing the Shared Heritage Area.

¶13. (SBU) In Anadyr, the director of the regional Beringia Nature-Ethnic Park, Natalya Kalyuzhina, explained the park's background and preparations for the transfer to federal authority. Russia established the park in 1993 as its contribution to a future international territory. But the park remained under regional jurisdiction due to the intervention of local authorities, which at that time were much more powerful and independent than today. Because the park was always intended to be temporary, it has few of the trappings of a full-fledged park. It has no visitor center and no regular scientific activity aside from staffers' daily diaries of observations of flora, fauna, and weather patterns. Authorities are

reluctant to add to its budget. The park employs 22 staffers, including 15 inspectors who have no authority to enforce park protection regulations. If they discover violations, they must contact regional authorities, who in turn dispatch enforcement agents.

¶14. (SBU) The regional park covers 135,000 contiguous square miles. But the federal government's current plan calls for contributing less than one-tenth of that land to the Shared Heritage Area. MNRE's notional map shows 15 disconnected plots, totaling 11,600 square miles, scattered along the Bering Strait and Bering Sea coastline. MNRE told us that this plan remains under discussion and could change before the government completes its feasibility studies. Natalya Kalyuzhina said that the notion of fragmenting the territory makes no sense, given the logistical difficulty of traveling among the separate areas.

DEPUTY GOVERNOR PUSHES "TOTAL DEVELOPMENT PACKAGE"

¶15. (SBU) On September 19, Chukotka's recently appointed Deputy Governor, Leonid Gorenshteyn, told us that the regional government is working with Moscow on a broad set of economic priorities under Chukotka's strategic development plan, which President Medvedev approved in 2008. As Gorenshteyn described them to us, the priorities substantially parallel the Bering Strait cooperation proposals that MFA's U.S. bilateral affairs director, Alexander Zakharov, presented to the Embassy on April 17 (ref A). The proposals include expanding the existing Bering Strait visa-free travel regime to all permanent residents of Alaska and Chukotka,

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creating the Beringia Shared Heritage Area, and boosting economic ties through improved travel and postal infrastructure. Gorenshteyn also suggested that the United States and Russia conclude new Bering Straits Agreements to reflect new realities. However, he did not indicate what elements of the two original 1989 agreements should be changed.

¶16. (SBU) ESToff asked Gorenshteyn how it is possible to implement, let alone expand, visa-free travel between Alaska and Chukotka when even Russian citizens still require special permission to enter Chukotka, and when visiting Alaskan delegations are detained while trying to take advantage of visa-free travel. Gorenshteyn downplayed the problems, saying that the procedures are workable as long as travelers follow them. He alleged that the United States has never fully complied with the established procedure under the Bering Straits Agreement. He suggested, as an alternative, that the United States establish a consular presence in Chukotka. He noted that local residents who need to travel to the United States with a visa find it exceedingly difficult to do so because of the time and expense of traveling to Vladivostok or Moscow for an interview.

¶17. (SBU) ESToff remarked that proposals for improved transportation infrastructure, including regular commercial flights between Chukotka and Alaska, would not be workable without a stronger economic basis. (Note: Bering Air canceled its regularly scheduled service between Alaska and Chukotka some years ago, reportedly because of poor profitability. A State of Alaska official told us that requests for bribes by Chukotka transportation officials also played a role in the decision. END NOTE.)

COMMENT

¶18. (SBU) Chukotka's 50,000 residents have very limited transportation links with the rest of Russia. They are virtually salivating at the prospect of receiving an economic boost from their proximity to Alaska to attract investment and tourism, as well as to cross the Bering Strait themselves for exchange visits, educational and scientific cooperation, and tourism. The key, most say, is to simplify travel across the Bering Strait. The reality, however, is that Chukotka is a sparsely populated region whose economic circumstances, although improving, are still poor. It is difficult

to imagine that Russia's Federal Security Service would accept the idea of dropping the visa requirement for all Alaska residents, although the MFA has assured us it will happen if the U.S. agrees.

BEYRLE